

Senate Statistics

Secretaries of the Senate

J. Mark Trice (1953-1955)



"Early in January 1953, a very frightened and somewhat timid desert rat landed in Washington, feeling as out of place as anyone possibly could. I had not been in my hotel room 15 minutes when the phone rang and the voice at the other end said, 'This is Mark Trice.' I wondered then who that could be. He immediately told me that he was Secretary of the Senate and his interest that morning was in helping me to get started. He came to me like a life ring comes to a drowning man."
Senator Barry Goldwater, 1970

Twenty-five years ago, senators and staff universally identified one person as a walking encyclopedia of the Senate's twentieth century history and culture. At a time when the Senate's most senior incumbent had served only twenty-five years, J. Mark Trice was observing the fifty-seventh anniversary of his own 1916 arrival. As of 1973, Trice's long Senate career encompassed service as a page, secretary to the Sergeant at Arms, Deputy Sergeant at Arms, Secretary for the Minority, Secretary for the Majority, and Secretary of the Senate. When he retired at the end of that year, the Republican Conference thanked him profusely for helping members "avoid the many pitfalls lying in wait . . . for the imprecise or the unwary."

Several years into his retirement, the Senate Historical Office invited Trice to participate in the Office's oral history program, which records and transcribes the reminiscences of selected former staff members. He considered the offer and eventually declined it. In doing so, he perhaps recalled Senator [Matthew Quay](#)'s (R-PA) advice to young Carl Loeffler: "My boy, if you wish to succeed, keep your eyes and ears open and your mouth shut." Despite a reminder that even the closed-lipped Loeffler had prepared a memoir of his own six decades of Senate service, and Trice's own willingness to share rich anecdotes in informal conversation, the former secretary ultimately applied the "Quay Rule" to the oral history offer. Trice's refusal left a significant gap in the documentary record of the Senate's twentieth-century institutional history.

Born in the District of Columbia on October 22, 1902, Mark Trice attended District schools and served as a page from 1916 to 1919. At a time when the Senate took no responsibility for its pages' formal education, pages boasted that their unique educational experiences greatly surpassed those available to "schoolboys." As Trice explained in

1919 at Vice President [Thomas Marshall](#)'s annual Christmas dinner for Senate pages, "a Senate page studying history and shorthand has a better opportunity than a schoolboy learning the same subjects, because we are constantly in touch with both. We boys have an opportunity to watch the official reporters write shorthand and they will always answer questions that we do not understand, thereby making a teacher almost useless."

Throughout his long career, Trice found many occasions to witness history being made in the Senate chamber. One of the first occurred on January 22, 1917, as President Woodrow Wilson brushed by him on entering the chamber to deliver his "Peace Without Victory" speech – a last-ditch effort to avoid American involvement in World War I. Ten weeks later, on April 2, Trice was present in the House chamber, masquerading with his other Senate companions as a House page, as Congress declared war on Germany.

In 1919, despite his praise for the chamber as classroom, Trice completed formal courses at a nearby high school and accepted a job as secretary to the Senate Sergeant at Arms. For the next decade, he held that post while attending night classes at Washington's Emerson Institute and then the Georgetown University School of Law. Soon after receiving his law degree in 1928, Trice left the Senate to practice law. As the Great Depression deepened, however, he realized that his future would most likely be brighter in the Senate than in a struggling law firm. Consequently, in 1932 he accepted the post of deputy Senate Sergeant at Arms.

As he was settling into his new job, the 1932 elections, by landslide margins, returned the Democrats to power in Congress and the White House. Soon after the election, but before the Republicans relinquished control on March 3, 1933, the Senate voted to fire its lame-duck Sergeant at Arms, David Barry. Another long-term Senate employee who had started as a page in 1875, Barry got into trouble for an article, originally scheduled for publication after his retirement, in which he described an improved ethical climate on Capitol Hill. "There are not many senators or representatives [these days] who sell their votes for money, and it is pretty well known who those few are; but there are many demagogues." In removing Barry, the Senate made Trice the acting Sergeant at Arms. In one of the most hectic periods of his long career, the thirty-one-year-old Trice took over major responsibilities for planning Franklin Roosevelt's inauguration. (Years later he directed Capitol Hill arrangements for the inaugurations of Dwight Eisenhower and Richard Nixon.) Two days before the 1933 inauguration, the sudden death of Senator [Thomas Walsh](#) (D-MT), Roosevelt's designated attorney general, intensified Trice's burdens.

On returning to the majority, the Democrats agreed to keep Trice as deputy Sergeant at Arms. In later years, he boasted of getting along better with Democrats than with his fellow Republicans. He regularly played golf in the 1930s with two key Senate Democrats -- Majority Leader [Joseph T. Robinson](#) (AR) and Senate Secretary Edwin Halsey.

His bipartisan friendship with Secretary Halsey came to an abrupt end in 1943 as a result of turmoil in the Sergeant at Arms office. That turmoil had begun in November 1942

when Majority Leader [Alben Barkley](#) (D-KY) sought to break a southern filibuster. Barkley obtained a Senate order to arrest absent senators and bring them to the chamber for the quorum necessary to shut down the filibuster. Sergeant at Arms Chesley Jurney directed Mark Trice to travel to the Mayflower Hotel, late at night, to compel the attendance of [Kenneth McKellar](#) (D-TN), the Senate's third most senior member. The seventy-three-year-old Tennessee senator had first met Trice shortly after entering the Senate in 1917 and considered him a good friend. When McKellar found the deputy Sergeant at Arms standing at his door, he greeted him warmly, but expressed some surprise that he was needed at the Senate at such a late hour. Although Trice carried an arrest order, he saw no reason to mention it.

Here is what happened next, according to Senate press aide Richard Riedel. "The old Senator came along in a friendly spirit, chatting with Mark as though they were on a normal trip together. Then suddenly, as the car climbed Capitol Hill, . . . McKellar put two and two together. He realized he was about to help the leadership to get a quorum that would foil his fellow Southerners. He stopped talking to Mark. His face grew redder and redder. By the time the car reached the Senate entrance, McKellar shot out and barreled through the corridors to find the source of his summons to the Capitol in the middle of the night." Barkley failed to obtain cloture. McKellar, who refused to speak to the Democratic leader for months, quickly engineered Sergeant at Arms Jurney's retirement.

As Jurney's replacement, the Senate elected [Wall Doxey](#), a former six-term House member and briefly a senator from Mississippi, who had recently lost a bid for a full term. As a former member, Doxey came to his new job with the belief that he outranked Secretary Halsey, a forty-six-year Senate employee, who had served as secretary for the past eleven years. As Doxey's deputy and Halsey's friend, Mark Trice found himself in an impossible situation. When he told Halsey that his loyalties had to lie with Doxey, their long friendship expired.

In 1946, following elections that returned the Senate to Republican control for the first time in fourteen years, party secretary Carl Loeffler advanced to the post of Senate secretary and Trice succeeded him as Republican secretary. At a time of significant turnover among members (the elections of 1944 and 1946 produced 51 new senators), both of these officials provided welcome knowledge of institutional operations. Several generations of postwar era members, in recalling their earliest days in the Senate, customarily began with thanks to Trice for his vital role in their education as senators.

Many stories of Trice's behind-the-scenes contributions are now lost to history, but several examples survive. In 1948, the Senate leadership asked for his advice on revising the practice of honoring recently deceased incumbents with Senate chamber memorial services. Prior to the medical and health care advances of recent times, approximately twenty-five incumbent senators died every ten years (compared with only three senators over the past decade.) Eight incumbents had died in the three years since the 1945 memorial service. To avoid perennial problems of poor turnout and endless speeches, Trice recommended a carefully structured chamber service. To give it a special touch, he

devised a program featuring a clergyman, a pianist, a soloist, and one member representing each party to deliver a formal eulogy. Other senators were welcome to insert speeches in the *Congressional Record* for later publication in special memorial volumes. The April 21, 1948, event seemed to please all concerned.

When the Democrats returned to power in 1949, Senate Secretary Loeffler retired to write his memoirs and Mark Trice continued as Republican secretary. In 1953, with the Republicans back in the majority, the fifty-year-old Trice finally advanced to the post of Secretary of the Senate. Two years later, however, the Democrats resumed majority control and he returned to the party secretaryship. He remained in that position until his December 1973 retirement, compiling a twenty-five-year record that no other party secretary – Republican or Democratic - has ever threatened. Considering Trice's vast knowledge of the Senate's institutional operations, he was a logical choice in 1975 to serve on the Commission on the Operation of the Senate, intended to improve the Senate's effectiveness. His July 3, 1987, death marked the end of a unique group of Senate officials who arrived as pages near the start of this century and rose to senior positions by its mid-point. If only we had their oral histories!